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SUBJECT: RUSSIA REMEMBERS SOLZHENITSYN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In bidding farewell to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russia took a moment to honor a great writer and dissident, and remember an historical period often glossed over in this era of gangbuster economic growth and public trumpeting of Russia's resurgent geopolitical power and pride. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev praised Solzhenitsyn's commitment to his country and principles of freedom. The public viewing at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the high-level attendance at the funeral underscored Solzhenitsyn's stature as a historical figure, but his August 4 death provoked only limited reflection on his writings or the political system which exiled him in 1974. Despite the official pomp and circumstance and heavy media coverage of his funeral, for most Russians Solzhenitsyn's death was simply a reminder of an era long past. End Summary.

The Dissident gets a State Funeral

¶2. (SBU) Solzhenitsyn had remained largely out of the public spotlight since his 1994 return to Russia and brief, unsuccessful foray on Russian television, but the Russian government spared little effort in arranging public events for his wake and funeral. Surrounded by a military color guard, portraits, official funerary wreaths as well as hundreds of flowers brought in ones and twos by mourners, Solzhenitsyn's open casket remained in the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) all day August 5. Early in the day, Putin personally offered his condolences to the family and told the press that Solzhenitsyn's work should have a more prominent role in the national educational curricula. Heavy rains may have discouraged some mourners from venturing out; when the Charge brought flowers to the viewing, only a handful of visitors were present. The Charge expressed his sympathy to two of Solzhenitsyn's sons Stepan and Yermolai and noted that the author had been a bridge between our two countries.

¶3. (U) The August 5 funeral service led by Patriarch Alexei II at Donskoi Monastery drew larger crowds, including Moscow Mayor Luzhkov, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President Medvedev, who cut short his vacation to attend the funeral and was shown on television with tears in his eyes during the service. The Charge appeared to be the only diplomatic emissary present. Hundreds of mourners, mostly aged 50 and older, passed by the casket during the two-hour liturgy and 75-minute funeral rites, and a crowd of around 2000 waited outside the cathedral. State television broadcast the entire service live. Earlier in the day, Medvedev signed a decree cementing Solzhenitsyn's legacy by naming a university scholarship, and streets in Moscow, Kislovodsk and Rostov-on-Don after Solzhenitsyn.

¶4. (SBU) Mourners and friends had a chance to express their condolences at a second memorial event at the Russian Academy of Sciences immediately after the funeral service. PolOff observed that in contrast to the wake and funeral, no one from the government attended and the guests -- largely older, poorly-dressed intelligentsia types -- could only enter with a ticket. After an opening toast by RAN head Yuriy Osipov, people were invited to make their own remarks at a microphone in the center of the room across from the head table at which the extended family and several

Orthodox priests sat. Guests sat at tables spread with typical Russian banquet fare and toasted with vodka, water and wine or juice. Several speakers called Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov the "conscience" of Russia. The son of Soviet composer Dmitriy Shostakovich said his family only decided to come back to Russia once Solzhenitsyn had returned. Solzhenitsyn's wife Natalya said that the most enduring memorial to him would be to fix all the insufficiencies and inadequacies in present-day Russia.

15. (SBU) Public officials heaped praise on Solzhenitsyn but carefully avoided any comments about his political activism, or the circumstances under which Solzhenitsyn lost his citizenship and spent 17 years in exile. President Medvedev wrote in his letter of condolences that Solzhenitsyn "served his country as a true citizen and patriot and ... cared wholeheartedly about Russia's reformation ... His studies of the most dramatic parts of the Russian history made an enormous contribution to world culture." Prime Minister Putin's letter of condolences stressed that "Solzhenitsyn's thorny life was an example of true service to the ideals of freedom, justice and humanism." Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov told the press at Solzhenitsyn's funeral: "His expressions of concern about [Russia's future] were justified ... Solzhenitsyn was right: we have no future just living off oil and gas." Finance Minister Kudrin declared Solzhenitsyn, along with Andrei Sakharov and Dmitry Likhachev, "Russia's moral compass."

"He was our Homer"

16. (U) Some media commentary observed that despite being one of the great Russian writers, Solzhenitsyn's voice had lost some resonance and influence in post-Soviet Russia. Vremya Novostey editorialized:

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"Russians did not notice Solzhenitsyn after his return, and nothing suggests that they will after his death. Still, authorities used him for their shifting political goals. His views were suitable for the current Russian leadership. Mass-circulation tabloid Argumenty I Fakty said: "Those who were in a hurry to express their respect [at the time he returned to Russia] would not listen to what he had to say about reforming Russia. Solzhenitsyn said bitterly that 'Russia chose the most tortuous and difficult way of parting with Communism.' And we still have not reached the end of this tortuous path." Interfax pointed out: "The epitaphs voiced from different political camps could not hide the obvious: Solzhenitsyn's political potential has not been called for since his return from immigration, and his attitude towards the state remained uncompromising and critical."

17. (SBU) But most coverage lionized Solzhenitsyn's historical significance in Russia and the world. Liberal daily Gazeta ran this on the front page: "Several generations of thinking Russians could not imagine what their lives would have been without Solzhenitsyn. Words cannot describe what he was and what he did. The words 'writer' and 'public figure' are too specific and functional to attach to the name of Solzhenitsyn. Of course, he was both. Also, he was a historian and original thinker, but there is also something about him that defies definition. To a majority of Russians, Solzhenitsyn is a symbol, one of the keys to what you could call a Russian cultural code." On the front page of liberal Kommersant: "He was all he is called now, after his death - difficult, harsh, confusing, arrogant, humane, prophetic, scary, conflict-prone, unsociable, great, and naive. He wasn't the sort of man everybody liked. But his role in history is great - you can't overstate it. (Stage director) Yuriy Lyubimov said better than anyone else, 'He was our Homer.'"

RUBIN